



Cornell University

John S. Knight Institute for Writing in the Disciplines

Document Title: Opening up: An Exercise in Opening Paragraph Flow

Author: John Robbins

Course: English 1168

Course Title: Cultural Studies: The Figure of the Badass in Literature and Film

Year of Award: Spring 2011

Copyright Statement:

This material is copyrighted by the author and made available through the Cornell University eCommons Digital Repository under a Creative Commons Attribution, Non-Commercial License.

This document is part of the John S. Knight Writing in the Disciplines First-year Writing Seminar Program collection in Cornell's eCommons Digital Repository.

<http://ecommons.library.cornell.edu/handle/1813/10813>.

Winner

Spring 2011 Knight Award for Writing Exercises and Handouts

The Knight Award for Writing Exercises recognizes excellence in short exercises and/or handouts designed to improve student writing. Appropriate topics may be drawn from the whole range of writing issues, large scale to small scale, such as development of theses, use of secondary sources, organization of evidence, awareness of audience, attention to sentence patterns (e.g., passive/active voice; coordination/ subordination), attention to diction, uses of punctuation, attention to mechanics (e.g., manuscript formats, apostrophes). Exercises and handouts may be developed for use in and/or out of class.

Submissions should comprise three parts: (1) A copy of the handouts or instructions that go to students. (2) An explanation of the exercise/ handout and of the principles behind it, addressed to future instructors who may use the material. (3) If possible, an example of a student response.

Submissions may range in length from one to four or five pages.

Winning Writing Exercises and Handouts will be deposited in a web accessible archive and made available to other instructors under a creative commons attribution, non-commercial license. (See creativecommons.org for more information about cc licensing.)

The two winning entries will receive \$350; honorable mentions (if any) will receive \$125.

Submissions are due in 101 McGraw Hall by Friday, May 20. No exceptions can be made.

Spring 2011 Knight Award for Writing Exercises and Handouts

~Please Print Clearly. Do not staple. Use paper clips only.~

Instructor's name John Robbins

Department English Course # and title ENGL 1168:101 : The Figure of the Badass in Literature and Film

Should I win a prize, I give the John S. Knight Institute permission to publish, quote from, and/or distribute copies of the writing exercises, and to distribute publicity to newspapers and other publications, local and/or national, about my winning the prize. I also grant the Knight Institute permission to deposit the writing exercises in a web accessible archive and make them available under a creative commons attribution, non-commercial license. I am prepared to send electronic versions of my text to Donna O'Hara (dlo1@cornell.edu) in the knight Institute. I understand that I will receive the award for my prize-winning essay upon submission of the electronic text.

Opening Up: An Exercise in Opening Paragraph Flow
Title of Writing Exercises

Instructor's signature John Robbins Date 5/10/11

Rationale for “Opening Up” Opening Paragraph Exercise

The inspiration for this idea came from the students themselves. Before submitting an essay draft, I had asked them to write on the back of the draft some areas that they would like us to focus on during an upcoming conference. I noticed that several students requested extra help in writing an introduction, and some uncertainty with what this might look like. Although we had read the chapter on “Openers” from John Trimble’s *Writing with Style: Conversations on the Art of Writing*, and in conjunction workshopped the opening paragraphs of a previous essay as a class, I saw that it might be helpful to target the introduction in another way. Additionally, I wanted to present the material in a way that came off the page to make the content of the essay “real” to them in order to engage different learning styles and make their interaction with the material more robust. I realized that writing introductions is for me a very visual process; I often imagine spreading out each paragraph before me, distilling their main points, and walking through the argument in its simplest form. I try to present a roadmap of my argument – laying out its twists and turns for the reader upfront, as well as its ultimate destination. As such, each step of my argument is represented in the introduction, in roughly the order in which it appears in the essay. In trying to replicate this process to my students, I realized that I would need a more visual method for them to communicate their ideas. The “Opening Up” exercise had students take an essay for which they had just completed a draft and place the opening paragraph on one side of a page, and the topic sentence of each paragraph from that essay on the other. They then colored the text of each of their topic sentences a different color, and attempted to color-code the sentences of their introduction which corresponded to their topic sentences (the exercise was e-mailed to them so that they would be able to color the text easily within a text document). Ideally, these should roughly line up, and follow the same order. The students then brought two copies of the completed exercise to class: one in color, and one in black-and-white. They peer reviewed the black-and-white version for clarity and the extent to which the introduction accurately presented the argument of the essay, then shared their color versions to show how their peers’ ideas of the structure accorded with their own. The “unveiling” at the end was very dramatic – they responded to it enthusiastically, and were genuinely interested in seeing how well their versions synched up with those of their peers.

While emphasizing that this technique is not the only way to produce a good introduction, I was able to show that an essential function of the introduction is to give the reader a clear guide to the essay, and that if a point is worth making in the body of the paper, it is worth telling your reader about beforehand. Additionally, the peer-review component allowed students to become aware that their own perceptions of how well the introduction mapped out the argument are not always so readily visible to others, and that they sometimes need to actively work to make the shape of their argument clear.

This exercise built on an earlier assignment in structuring an essay using topic sentences that the class had completed several weeks beforehand, which had students take the topic sentence of each paragraph from a recent essay draft and put them together on one page to see their argument at a glance. (That assignment was the winner of the Knight Institute’s award for writing exercises and handouts in the Spring semester of 2010.) This assignment would be easily

integrated into virtually any Freshman Writing Seminar: the advice it provides about structure is important for any clear expository writing, and it takes a very small amount of time on the students' part, since they have already written the relevant material. Several students approached me after the class in which we completed this activity and said that this technique fit their learning style especially well, and that it had given them a new way to conceive of their writing.

When I next use the assignment, I will make the peer-review component more visually based and parallel in structure to the first part of the assignment by distributing highlighters of different colors to the class, and then having them highlight corresponding areas of the argument using the same color. This will help them to visually map out their partner's argument in the same way that they did their own, and will make the visual comparison with the color version more powerful.

Opening Up: An Exercise in Opening Paragraph Flow

This exercise builds on the ideas of topic sentences and structure that you focused on in the “Topic Sentence” assignment. Its goal is to make you more aware of the “flow” of an opening paragraph, and how it should serve as a roadmap for your paper as a whole. Ideally, an introduction mirrors the progression of the argument: it should follow roughly the same order, and touch on the major points (if they’re important enough to earn a paragraph in your essay, they should get a shout-out in your introduction as well). This helps your reader follow your train of thought throughout, and makes you more aware of your argument’s direction and turns. While this certainly isn’t the only way to organize an introduction, it can be an extremely useful tool.

Using the draft of your fifth essay, copy the opening paragraph into the left-hand column. Then, copy the topic sentence of each body paragraph into the right-hand column. Now, read the two side by side, and think about how the structures relate. Change each sentence on the right’s font to a different color, then match it up with the sentence or sentences on the right that correspond to that idea, and make them that color as well (for example, if you color your third topic sentence green and it deals with the way John Carter must sacrifice his humanity when he enters Mars, then you’ll color the part of your introduction that corresponds to that point green too). Please bring two copies of this essay to class on Monday: *one in black and white, and one in full color.*

Introduction

Topic Sentences

-
- 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.
 - 4.
 - 5.
 - 6.

“Opening Up” Peer Review

This part of the exercise is meant to help you see the many ways that different people can interpret the same argument.

1. Looking at the black-and-white versions in front of you, *draw arrows* right to left, from the topic sentences to the parts of the introduction to which you feel they best correspond (if any).
2. When you are done, have your partner show you his/her color version.
3. Look at how the versions align. Describe:
 - a. How are your conceptions of the argument different than your partner's?
 - b. How are the versions the same?
 - c. Do you feel that the introduction does a good job preparing the reader for the rest of the essay? Are crucial points omitted, or minor points focused on for too long? Would you recommend revisions?
4. Discuss these suggestions with your partner.

Opening Up: An Exercise in Opening Paragraph Flow

This exercise builds on the ideas of topic sentences and structure that you focused on in the "Topic Sentence" assignment. Its goal is to make you more aware of the "flow" of an opening paragraph, and how it should serve as a roadmap for your paper as a whole. Ideally, an introduction mirrors the progression of the argument: it should follow roughly the same order, and touch on the major points (if they're important enough to earn a paragraph in your essay, they should get a shout-out in your introduction as well). This helps your reader follow your train of thought throughout, and makes you more aware of your argument's direction and turns. While this certainly isn't the only way to organize an introduction, it can be an extremely useful tool.

Using the draft of your fifth essay, copy the opening paragraph into the left-hand column. Then, copy the topic sentence of each body paragraph into the right-hand column. Now, read the two side by side, and think about how the structures relate. Change each sentence on the right's font to a different color, then match it up with the sentence or sentences on the right that correspond to that idea, and make them that color as well (for example, if you color your third topic sentence green and it deals with the way John Carter must sacrifice his humanity when he enters Mars, then you'll color the part of your introduction that corresponds to that point green too). Please bring two copies of this essay to class on Monday: *one in black and white, and one in full color.*

Introduction

The advancement of society can be measured in different ways. From wealth to technology, society is constantly advancing to a new level. However, to make advancements, some sacrifices must be made. As natural selection applies to the advancement of animal species, some survival-of-the-fittest must be employed to advance a human society. The Spartans in 300 exemplify a society that pushes forward in its desire to advance as a warrior society. From determining what children are allowed to live to defending their way of life, the Spartans do not think twice about how they can further their superiority, even if it is in ways that an outsider would view as wrong. However, this advancement comes with a price. Resulting from the desire to perfect their own society, the Spartans act as though they are superior to other races, cultures, and even individual people who are not "blessed" enough to be a citizen of Sparta. The portrayal of Spartans as superior beings parallels the view that many societies have today as advancement of society continues, causing them to prize superiority within their own society and over other societies, allowing for the people to have a continued desire to strive for further advancement.

Topic Sentences

1. Within their own system, they had to discriminate to become as powerful as they are.
2. In the first major battle between the Spartans and the Persians, the Spartans are superior to the Persian army in many ways.
3. On top of living appearances, the method of death greatly differs between the Spartans and all others. In scenes where Spartans die, the death is glorious battle against a powerful enemy, whereas the other deaths are often much less glorified.
4. Spartans are not only above the other races, but even above their fellow Greeks.

Opening Up: An Exercise in Opening Paragraph Flow

This exercise builds on the ideas of topic sentences and structure that you focused on in the “Topic Sentence” assignment. Its goal is to make you more aware of the “flow” of an opening paragraph, and how it should serve as a roadmap for your paper as a whole. Ideally, an introduction mirrors the progression of the argument: it should follow roughly the same order, and touch on the major points (if they’re important enough to earn a paragraph in your essay, they should get a shout-out in your introduction as well). This helps your reader follow your train of thought throughout, and makes you more aware of your argument’s direction and turns. While this certainly isn’t the only way to organize an introduction, it can be an extremely useful tool.

Using the draft of your fifth essay, copy the opening paragraph into the left-hand column. Then, copy the topic sentence of each body paragraph into the right-hand column. Now, read the two side by side, and think about how the structures relate. Change each sentence on the right’s font to a different color, then match it up with the sentence or sentences on the right that correspond to that idea, and make them that color as well (for example, if you color your third topic sentence green and it deals with the way John Carter must sacrifice his humanity when he enters Mars, then you’ll color the part of your introduction that corresponds to that point green too). Please bring two copies of this essay to class on Monday: *one in black and white, and one in full color.*

Introduction

The advancement of society can be measured in different ways. From wealth to technology, society is constantly advancing to a new level. However, to make advancements, some sacrifices must be made. As natural selection applies to the advancement of animal species, some survival-of-the-fittest must be employed to advance a human society. **The Spartans in 300 exemplify a society that pushes forward in its desire to advance as a warrior society.** From determining what children are allowed to live to defending their way of life, the Spartans do not think twice about how they can further their superiority, even if it is in ways that an outsider would view as wrong. However, this advancement comes with a price. Resulting from the desire to perfect their own society, the Spartans act as though they are superior to other races, cultures, and even individual people who are not “blessed” enough to be a citizen of Sparta. The portrayal of Spartans as superior beings parallels the view that many societies have today as advancement of society continues, causing them to prize superiority within their own society and over other societies, allowing for the people to have a continued desire to strive for further advancement.

Topic Sentences

1. **Within their own system, they had to discriminate to become as powerful as they are.**
2. **In the first major battle between the Spartans and the Persians, the Spartans are superior to the Persian army in many ways.**
3. **On top of living appearances, the method of death greatly differs between the Spartans and all others. In scenes where Spartans die, the death is glorious battle against a powerful enemy, whereas the other deaths are often much less glorified.**
4. **Spartans are not only above the other races, but even above their fellow Greeks.**

"Opening Up" Peer Review

This part of the exercise is meant to help you see the many ways that different people can interpret the same argument.

1. Looking at the black-and-white versions in front of you, *draw arrows* right to left, from the topic sentences to the parts of the introduction to which you feel they best correspond (if any).
2. When you are done, have your partner show you his/her color version.
3. Look at how the versions align. Describe:
 - a. How are your conceptions of the argument different than your partner's?
Will be correct. The partner always seems to be a sentence ahead when looking at where a topic sentence comes into play. Mine includes more of the thesis.
 - b. How are the versions the same?
*~~The first not the second~~
They're not really.*
 - c. Do you feel that the introduction does a good job preparing the reader for the rest of the essay? Are crucial points omitted, or minor points focused on for too long? Would you recommend revisions?
I would like to see how advancement of society comes into play as he talks about glorious (tech,) death in battle. It seems omitted.
4. Discuss these suggestions with your partner.